



Acquisition Truths from the Trenches

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Those in the acquisition career field understand that cost, schedule, and performance are keys to success. That being said, many in the acquisition force fail to realize the triad can be achieved with speed and agility. Rapid, agile acquisition is a result of aggressive, smart risk management and creative problem solving, and many applaud out-of-the-box thinking. If we make the assumption, however, that there is a “box” of acceptable answers, the number of possible solutions has already been limited. The ongoing fight we are engaged in is real, but we still struggle to get the user what he/she needs in a timely manner.

More often than not, the acquisition community is delivering urgently needed solutions late to the game. To keep pace with modern warfare’s unconventional form, we must embrace unconventional acquisition practices. When the Department of Defense has been pressured to deliver something quickly, such as Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles for Iraq and Afghanistan, we suspend

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the rules, set up a fast track path, and push aside the bureaucracy; however, acquisition rules don't always need to be bent to deliver products quickly.

The New Mindset

I spent the summer of 2008 with the U.S. Special Operations Command working within the Program Executive Office for Fixed Wing in a mentoring program developed there over the last three years. The mentoring program came about because leadership in USSOCOM saw capability gaps in DoD's ability to rapidly acquire what the warfighters needed. USSOCOM leadership selects junior force acquisition personnel to deploy to USSOCOM and provide wartime acquisition support. The deployers, known as "ghosts," provide urgent acquisitions support to combat operations. The ghosts also forward deploy to support combat operations as a liaison officer. Lastly, the ghosts receive unique mentoring opportunities from special operations forces acquisition and operational leaders. The mentoring program leads to operationally oriented acquisition officers.

In my time with PEO-FW, I learned that program organization representatives had developed and followed a few acquisition truths that result in the fielding of critical capability in a rapid manner, and they are currently using those truths to mentor officers in acquisition career fields for implementation at their home base. The truths:

- Fast does not equal undisciplined.
- More bureaucracy does not ensure a better product.
- Risk must be managed, not avoided.
- Faster does not have to increase cost/risk.
- Competition can be done quickly.
- Unconventional thinking is an enabler.
- Credibility enables freedom of action.

The following sections discuss lessons learned from working with PEO-FW and following the acquisition truths it has established.

Stronger Communication

USSOCOM fundamentally believes that acquisition can quickly provide warfighters what they need, when they ask for it—and the command seeks the path that can best meet those needs. Now, you may think that USSOCOM does not have to follow the acquisition regulations and directives like the rest of the military, but that is not true. USSOCOM follows DoD 5000 series policy, with the same funding rules and new program starting rules as standard acquisition programs. One of USSOCOM fixed wing programs' biggest strengths is that program representatives listen and respond to the user's needs. Because of the open and frank communication with the users early in the acquisition life cycle and because of the program's ability to set achievable goals, stronger expectations are set both with the acquirer and user.

Additionally, because of the strong communication links between the user and acquirer, decisions can be made much faster, giving both parties an immediate determination of success or failure and allowing them to re-focus immediately and strike from another angle. As an acquisition corps, we need to be involved in a culture of success with the operators. If we don't understand how and why they do what they do, we will never identify with the mission and we will fail every time. Taking the time to learn what the operator is doing and needs is one of the reasons normal acquisitions chains are so long and cumbersome. Because special operations forces acquisition representatives know the key pieces, they are able to field support in days and months. A good example is the defensive gun on the CV-22; it only took six weeks from initiation to competitive contract award, including following all the acquisition rules.

The "R" Word

The acquisition community in general has lost the edge on how we deal and cope with risk. We have multiple software tools that we use to build glossy charts showing what we perceive as risks to our program. More than likely, the risks we put on the glossy chart will never occur because we have identified them. Instead, what we need to do as acquisition professionals is simple:

- Anticipate problems. Look daily at risks that may start growing like barnacles on the bottom of a ship.
- Accept the underlying facts of those risks, and some of those risks are part of the bureaucratic process from which we cannot escape.
- See the bigger picture; i.e., where does my program fit into the rest of the war machine? Knowing that will help us make better decisions.
- Handle one thing at a time, but understand that it is OK to have many things to manage on your plate.
- Don't give up on the goal when the chips are down. Look beyond your current scope. Develop a process—look for trouble, develop a method to identify what are the issues, what has already happened, what are the options, and surround yourself with problem solvers and those who can compensate for your own and your team's weaknesses.

Accepting Responsibility

There are those who say you can't fix the acquisition system due to all the political tentacles that are always changing procedures and processes. That is far from true. In fiscal year 2009, the USSOCOM fixed wing acquisition enterprise (including supporting service program offices) delivered more than 36 aircraft and 150-plus special munitions, put 37 new MC-130Js on contract, and modified every other aircraft in the special operations forces fixed wing portfolio (CV-22, MC-130s, AC-130s). That and more was accomplished with a very small, focused team.

What does USSOCOM do that is different? Firstly, the government acquirers accept responsibility for the outcome—many acquisition organizations pay contractors to manage risk for them, but special operations forces acquirers integrate the activities, not the contractor. Secondly, government acquirers retain the authority over the program and do not abdicate it to the contractors. As a result, they can provide a rapid solution versus the perfect solution.

Some examples of providing a rapid solution include a laser designating device fielded in seven days; a small, unmanned air vehicle fielded in 14 weeks; a heavily modified King Air 350 bought, modified, and fielded to combat operations in less than six months (and that fleet of nine aircraft flew 10,000 hours in 2009); and a new weapons development program that went from initiation to delivery in just under one year and was the Office of the Secretary of Defense 2007 Advanced Concept Technology Demonstrations award winner. Sometimes a product is needed that will only be used for six months or a year. The current fight transforms so rapidly that often “throw-away” systems better meet the user’s need. (Think of the World War II cheap bombers, fighters, and the Liberty Ships.) And sometimes, a product needs to last for 25 years. Either way, the core processes are the same:

- Use unconventional thinking—a must!—to get tools to the warfighter quickly.
- Know and follow the rules (ethically and legally).
- Encourage out-of-the-box thinking.
- Ensure your team has the expert for the task at hand.
- Keep the team small.

Rapid decision making and access to the decision maker are huge enablers to success. In most cases, the longer the approval chain, the more convoluted the requirement gets. Shorter chains of command have always empowered teams, with leaders enabling them to make decisions because they have the latitude and because they wholly understand the

user’s needs. This is especially true at USSOCOM, where decisions are pushed to the lowest levels of execution.

A New Acquisition Structure

Innovative thinking within PEO-FW over the last year has produced a new acquisition organization: the Joint Acquisition

Task Force. Using a bedrock of unconventional thinking and approaches, risk taking, and flexible equipping, the JATF has raised a formidable team that has had immediate and substantial successes. The JATF has command and control over numerous combat acquisition detachments (CAD) that are pulled from within DoD’s centers of excellence. JATF team members follow a unity of effort and a unity of command construct, whereas the JATF commander has oversight of all the CADs and the CADs work toward the same goal, although they all have a different piece of the puzzle. For example, the U.S. Navy Dahlgren CAD builds software packages for a fire control system and the CAD at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base buys consoles and guns for gunships—both work closely together, but they have different responsibilities. The CADs convene regularly to ensure they are all on track and not crossing paths. That ensures that they don’t have to back up and fix something later.



A key difference between the JATF construct and other acquisition organizations is that layers of command structure have been removed and the JATF commander has direct contact with the CADs. This is proving to be a game-changer. Force members are developing and producing most of the hardware from available resources within the government, and the government, not a contractor, integrates the activities. Another core attribute of the JATF is that the CADs are not assigned to the task force, but they have a common understanding of the objectives and the combatant commander’s intent. Employing the unity of effort cuts out any waste and ensures each task is solely focused while the



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unity of command cuts out the layers embedded in normal chains of command within the military.

The construct of the CADs replicates the U.S. Army Special Operations Command operational detachment philosophy in which a detachment consists of numerous members who have a specific function specialty on the team but conduct cross-training to be competent at each other's positions. Operational detachments succeed because the members understand the mission, constraints, and individual area of operations before the task begins. The JATF remains as the key leadership cell, and the CADs expand and contract as needed to help the JATF fulfill the mission at hand.

Working Together

Acquisition corps members need to focus, especially in light of the shrinking military budget, upon the area of jointness, both within the DoD spectrum and with U.S. allies. Forging ahead with multiple organizations can be painful, but when done well, it can leverage amazing results. An example of this is the RC-26 program managed at USSOCOM, currently fielded in Operation Iraqi Freedom, which has nine different government agencies and industry involved in management and execution.

Collaboration of acquisition professionals and industry is necessary to ensure we are providing the best solution. We need to throw that box away and start coming up with innovative solutions. Having a core set of processes and pro-

cedures that allows for ebbs and flows will enable credibility within acquisition and credibility equals freedom of action. Some further tips for better collaboration:

- Credibility does enable freedom to do your job (and vice versa).
- Be upfront with your chain (up/down/lateral).
- You can lead and affect change from the middle.
- Information is key; everyone has a different ability to handle it though.
- Know when/how to call it what it is.
- Equipping the fight on time can be as important as the fight itself.
- Closely linked operations/acquisition teams rapidly deliver combat capability.

We in the acquisition community are the gatekeepers for our nation's survival. The warfighter cannot do his/her job effectively and win the next battle by sheer wit and talent alone. How we do our job as an acquisition corps now and in the future has a bigger effect on the survival of our nation than many realize.

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